

TEXTS OF BSE IN ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT OF LINGUISTIC RESEARCH

Varlamova Elena

candidate of philological sciences, assistant professor

Department of Germanic Philology

Kazan (Volga region) Federal University

420008 Russia, Kazan, Kremlevskaya st., 18

el-var@mail.ru

The purpose of this study is to determine whether readability is affected by manipulating the structure of verb phrases (VPs) in reading material created for Basic State Exam. Having analyzed the structure of the VPs (Verb Phrases) in the texts of Basic State Exam, we distinguished the common distributional models, which are characterized, as a rule, by a great number of words and complex structure. We produced an alternative variant of the text, reducing the number of words within the VPs and simplifying the structure, preparing this way the material for experimental testing of junior students of Kazan Federal University.

Key Words: readability, syntax, phrase, distributional pattern, Basic (Russian) State Exam in English

The readability problem has been widely explored in the foreign linguistics, being scarcely observed in the native one. Recently, readability is understood in two senses: as a synonym to legibility, which is a measure of how easily a reader can distinguish individual letters or characters from each other, and linguistic readability, having to deal with reflecting the degree of comprehension of the text due to its lexical, grammatical characteristics and discursive organization. It is the second sense that we are interested in in our investigation.

To the best of our knowledge, the syntactic readability of Basic State Exam texts (texts for Reading, questions 10-17) has never been the target of linguistic research. We are aimed to test their comprehension by the Russian students for whom the level of the English language acquisition is pre-intermediate (according to the Test of English as a foreign language suggested by Kazan International Linguistic Centre). The choice of VPs (Verb Phrases) as a focus of the research has not been random.

Having analyzed 10 texts of the sample Basic State Exam paper [2], we came to the conclusion that the VPs perform the most complex layer of all the types of phrases presented, containing the major amount of words and variety of complicated structures.

As an example for the study undertaken, we decided to apply to the selected text “*Seat Belts: Do We Really Need Them?*”, which contains the least number of words – 361, while the total number of the words in the texts suggested in the corpus ranges from 361 to 628.

Seat Belts: Do We Really Need Them?

In many countries now seat belts are compulsory for the driver and front seat passengers at least. Most doctors believe that seat belts save people from being seriously hurt in a crash, but there are some people who still think that it is more dangerous to wear a seat belt than not to wear one.

They say that a seat belt may trap one in a car that is burning, has fallen into a river or the sea and is sinking, so that one is burnt to death or drowned.

But less than half of one per cent of car accidents lead to fire or sinking, and in any case, a seat belt may easily save a person from being knocked unconscious in an accident, so that he or she is able to undo the seat belt immediately and get out of a car that is on fire or sinking.

People who object to seat belts also sometimes say that without one, one may be thrown right out of a car in a crash, but doctors will tell you that is the last thing one wants to happen: if one is thrown out of a car, one hits something, usually the road, and usually hard and at speed. It is better to remain inside a car in the case of a crash.

There is also the question of personal freedom; some people say that it is an attack on their freedom to force them to wear a seat belt, whether they want to or not. But even in a democracy there are a lot of things a person is denied the right to do though he or she wants to do them. I may, for example, want to play music loudly at night; it interferes with my freedom if I am not allowed to do this. But my neighbors have their own rights to freedom, just as I have. They want to be free to sleep quietly at night, and if I stop them doing so, I am interfering with their freedom.

How does this affect seat belts? In what way does it interfere with the rights of others if someone refuses to wear a seat belt? Well, first of all because common sense tells us that a driver without a seat belt has less control of a car if there is an accident, so that he or she is more likely to be a danger to others, who after all also have the right to be protected as much as possible from accident.

The analysis of the phrasal structure in the text should give the information about the role of syntactic phenomena in the process of a text comprehension, which is typical for the Russian mature students (aged 19-20) learning English as a foreign language. It might be useful for planning the proper educational activities for the same type and level of students in future. The process of the experiment and its results will not be described in this article, as we are aimed at describing the methods of the Basic State Exam texts transformation changing the structure of VPs. A new text, as a variant of the text that already exists, should be considered as the result of this particular study.

“Phrases are projected from lexical categories, and hence we have phrases such as NP (Noun Phrase), VP (Verb Phrase), PP (Preposition Phrase), and so on. We use distributional evidence to classify each type, and then specify rules to account for the distributions we have observed” [3]. Noun phrases are generally characterized by the following structure:

NP → (Det) (A) N (PP/S)

This rule characterizes a phrase, and is one instance of a phrase structure rule (PS rule). The rule indicates that an NP can consist of an optional Det (determiner), any number of optional A (adjective), an obligatory N (noun), and then an optional PP (prepositional phrase) or a modifying S (sentence) (examples of the NPs from the text under analysis will be given after the introduction of the theoretical part).

Just as N projects an NP, V projects a VP. These phrases all have a V as their head – as projections of V, they form VP. VP can be characterized by the following rule:

VP → V (NP) (PP/S)

This simple VP rule says that a VP can consist of an obligatory V followed by an optional NP and then any number of PPs or an S. The rule thus does not generate ill-formed VPs such as these: *leave the meeting sing, the leave meeting, leave on time the meeting.*

The most common environment where an adjective phrase (AP) occurs is in ‘linking verb’ constructions as in: *John feels _____*, where the gap space is the place for an AP. Expressions like the following can occur in the blank space here: *happy, uncomfortable, terrified, sad, proud of her, proud to be his student, proud that he passed the exam*, etc. The expression like *a happy person* can also occur in the gap, but it is an NP already, having noun as the main component.

Since these all include an adjective (A) as the main member, we can safely conclude that they all form an AP. Looking into the constituents of these, we can formulate the following simple PS rule for the AP:

AP → A (PP/VP/S)

Another phrasal syntactic category is adverb phrase (AdvP), for example *soundly, well, clearly, extremely, carefully, very soundly, almost certainly, very slowly, etc.* These phrases are often used to modify verbs, adjectives, and adverbs themselves, and they can all occur in principle in the following environments: *He behaved very _____, They worded the sentence very _____, He treated her very _____*. Phrases other than an AdvP cannot appear here. The AdvP rule can be given as follows:

AdvP → (AdvP) Adv

Another major phrasal category is preposition phrase (PP). PPs generally consist of a preposition plus an NP: *from Seoul, in the box, in the hotel, into the soup, with John and his dog, under the table*, etc. These PPs can appear in a wide range of environments: *John came from Seoul. They put the book in the box. They stayed in the hotel. The fly fell into the soup.*

One clear case in which only a PP can appear is the following: *The squirrel ran straight/right.*

The intensifiers *straight* and *right* can occur neither with an AP nor with an AdvP. We can deduce the following general rule for forming a PP:

PP → P NP

In our research we place the VP as the centre of our analysis. This choice can be explained by the following reasons. First of all, the NPs in the texts under consideration can’t boast a complicated, diversified structure. The typical PSs of NPs are characterized by the formulas:

NP → (A)N

(*seat belts; common sense*)

NP → (Det)N

(*most drivers; some people; my neighbours; a person*)

NP → N

(*it; they; one; he; she; doctors; I; this, someone*)

Only three noun phrases perform more or less elaborate structure:

NP → (A)N(PP)(PP)

(*less than half of one percent of car accidents*)

NP → N(S)

(*people who object to seatbelts*)

NP → (Det)N(PP)

(*a driver without a seatbelt*)

APs are rather few in number (4 examples in the first text) and are characterized by an approximately similar structure (*are compulsory for the driver and front seat passengers; is*

better to remain inside a car in the case of a crash; am not allowed to do this; is more likely to be a danger to others), which is the general feature of all APs in general.

PPs constitute the part of NPs and VPs as a rule, while AdvPs are very simple in structure, bearing at the same time not less of the overall amount of semantic workload.

VPs in the texts of Basic State Exam seem to be the most complex in their structure, comprising the greatest number of structural components, as well as words simply, and transferring greater volume of information necessary for the successful task completion.

It is the VPs that give the higher level of hierarchical structure. The following is one of the examples of structural hierarchy:

VP→V(S), where the S consists of NP and VP, where NP→(A)N; VP→V(NP)(PP)(PP)
(*___ believe that seat belts save people from being hurt in a crash*)

Having changed the first text of the exam, we produced the following extract, in which the fragments we transformed are given in bold:

Seat Belts: Do We Really Need Them?

*In many countries now seat belts are compulsory for the driver and front seat passengers at least. Most doctors believe: **seat belts save people, because people can be seriously hurt in a crash**, but there are some people who still **think: it is more dangerous to wear a seat belt than not to wear one.***

*They say: **“A seat belt may trap one in a car. When the car is burning, has fallen into a river or the sea and is sinking. Then, the person is burnt to death or drowned”.***

*But less than half of one per cent of car accidents lead to fire or sinking, and in any case, a seat belt **may easily save a person, as the person can be knocked unconscious in an accident**, so that he or she is able to undo the seat belt immediately and **get out. The car might be on fire or sinking.***

*People who object to seat belts also sometimes say: **“Without one, one may be thrown right out of a car in a crash**, but doctors will tell you: “No one wants this to happen”.If one is thrown out of a car, one hits something, usually the road, and usually hard and at speed. It is better to remain inside a car in the case of a crash.*

*There is also the question of personal freedom; some people **say that it is an attack on their freedom. They are forced to wear a seat belt**, whether they want to or not. But even in a democracy there are a lot of things a person is denied the right to do though he or she wants to do them. I may, for example, want to play music loudly at night; it interferes with my freedom if I am not allowed to do this. **But my neighbors have their own rights. They are free. Just as I am. They want to be free. They want to sleep quietly at night**, and if I stop them doing so, I am interfering with their freedom.*

*How does this affect seat belts? In what way does it interfere with the rights of others if someone refuses to wear a seat belt? Well, first of all because **common sense tells us: a driver without a seat belt has less control of a car** if there is an accident, so that he or she is more likely to be a danger to others, who after all also **have the right. The right is protection as much as possible from accident.***

As we see, the most complex VPs, characterized by a greater number of components, were transformed to a series of simple sentences. For example, the extract “ *___ believe that seat belts*

save people from being seriously hurt in a crash” was changed into “ ____ believe: seat belts save people, because people can be seriously hurt in a crash”.

Thus, we managed to stick to a three-component VP structure. Now, the VPs can be described by the following distributional models:

VP → V
(is; are)
VP → V(NP)
(save people)
VP → V(PP)
(can be hurt in a crash)
VP → V(NP)(PP)
(may trap one in a car)
V → V(V)(PP)
(want to play music)

With the change in the number of components in distributional models, the number of the sentences in the transformed text materially increased from 13 to 23. We should also bear in mind that the number of clauses within compound sentences increased as well, making the number of simple sentences in the second text even greater.

In the following research, we need to test, whether the complicated structure of verb phrases, which we consider to be one of the most essential features of the complexity of the texts under analysis, discourages the students from coming to right answers at Basic State Exam. To gain the answer, we produced a new variant of the text as an alternative to the BSE text, in which the sentences are devoid of the VPs with complex structure. This inevitably led to the increase in the number of sentences in the text, as our aim was not to lose the overall meaning of the text, leaving all the words as “holders” of the meaning.

The experiment will be conducted among the students of the English language of Kazan federal university and Kazan international linguistic centre aged from 19 to 45, who are studying English as a foreign language. The level of their language proficiency is stated as pre-intermediate, according to the Test of English as a foreign language suggested by Kazan international linguistic centre.

According to foreign scholars, “despite its potential importance, syntax does not receive the systematic attention it deserves in the development and selection of reading material either for native speakers or for ESL students” [1].

The researchers notice that most frequently it is only the length of the sentences and the number of words that are taken into consideration while analyzing the degree of readability. Therefore, the analysis of the distributional models employed in the text can give the further source for understanding of the impact of syntactic combinations on the readers.

Some of the foreign researchers claim that those who adhere to the sentence length criterion of readability formulas believe that short, simple sentences are simplest, in other words, easiest to comprehend. But this may actually be misleading. There are others who believe that grammatical complexity may in fact be an aid to comprehension rather than a hindrance.

The investigation similar to the one we are going to do has been done already among certain audiences of students. For example, a sample of 85 students was randomly selected from a

population of undergraduate (mostly freshmen) ESL students enrolled in the University of Puerto Rico's English 001 course. They were native speakers of Spanish, literate in their mother tongue, and raised in monolingual homes. One third were randomly assigned to three groups. One group read the passages in version 1; one group read version 2 passages, and the third group read version 3 passages. All were given the same comprehension questions [1]. The results the author came to were surprising, considering the research already existent. The texts with a greater number of simple sentences were defined by the students as less comprehensible and didn't bring the expected result. The study on the syntactic constructions as material aspect of readability of the texts can contribute to the work performed by Kazan federal university teachers on the way to advanced language teaching [4], [5].

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